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An Italian Opera on an American Story;---Not an American Opera. ❀



WHATEVER the ultimate fate of Puccini's "La Fanciulla del West," an opera in three acts based on David Belasco's play, "The Girl of the Golden West," its production, for the first time on any stage, at the Metropolitan Opera House, Saturday night, December 10, was a notable event. Indeed it was unique. For up to that time no work by a leading foreign composer had had its first performance here. Moreover it was the first opera by a composer of Puccini's distinction to be based on an American subject.

Nothing was neglected that would make for the success of the production. The composer came over from Italy for the rehearsals. Belasco, a genius of stage-craft, worked out the "business" of the individual roles and the ensemble. The principals provided by Gatti-Casazza were Emmy Destinn, as Minnie; Caruso,

THE as Johnson; and Amato, as Jack Rance. Subor-
LOTUS dinate roles were in excellent hands. Toscanini
conducted, and although the opera was new, he
achieved his customary feat of conducting en-
tirely from memory. The house was wonder-
fully brilliant. Everyone seemed to recognize
that it was a gala occasion.

We are nothing if not novel in this coun-
try ; and I believe it is safe to say that at the
Metropolitan Opera House that night, for the
first time anywhere, the librettist shared in
the curtain calls with the composer. Of course,
Belasco is not exactly the librettist of the opera,
but the author of the play on which the libretto
is based. Even from this point of view, however,
his appearances before the curtain with Puccini
were an interesting departure from the obscur-
ity to which anyone who has anything to do
with the libretto of an opera usually is relegated.
The two men presented a strong contrast. Puc-
cini, tall and robust, and in conventional even-
ing dress, might have been a prosperous man of
affairs instead of the most distinguished of living
Italian opera composers. Belasco, grey-haired,
with keen, mobile features and piercing eyes,
the clerical waistcoat that he invariably wears

giving him the appearance of a priest, was decidedly the more unusual figure.

Curtain calls are supposed to be spontaneous, but the manner in which they are taken is carefully stage-managed. Etiquette prescribed that the first performance of "La Fanciulla del West" should be a Puccini triumph. Belasco was allowed to share it, but every precaution was taken to prevent his "getting away" with it. The composer was the only one who came before the curtain alone. When Belasco appeared, it was always with the artists or with Puccini. Had he come out alone, there is no doubt that the house would have risen at him and cheered. For long before the curtain fell on the first act, his great share in the success of the evening had become apparent.

During the second intermission I saw him in the lobby near the door leading to the stage and went up and spoke to him—told him how much everyone thought the opera owed to the play. But he was an actor before he became a playwright and not a line in his face showed his feelings one way or another. And when I left him to go back to my seat, he was still standing there in his clerical garb, a solitary,



THE silent and unique figure, his face as inscrutable
LOTUS as that of a sphinx, while, within, the lights
drooped on the glittering horseshoe and the
curtain rose on the California redwoods.



THE old style operatic libretto was so ridiculous that its absurdities were well summed up by the remark that "what is too stupid to be spoken is sung." But in proportion as the muse of melody pure and simple has deserted the Italian composers, they have substituted for the nonsense which their inspired predecessors were able to transfuse with song, dramas of genuine interest and power. It hardly is necessary to point out that "Cavalleria Rusticana" and "Pagliacci" owe so much to the potent appeal in their tragic stories, that neither Mascagni nor Leoncavallo has been able to score another success. More fortunate as well as more gifted than either of these composers, Puccini was able to follow his "Bohème" with a "Tosca" and a "Madama Butterfly," each based on a play the success of which is part of the history of the stage.

Ever since the advent of the play-hunting

composer, however, it has seemed to me the time must come, when his choice would fall on a drama so vital in its portrayal of modern life, so moving in its colloquial appeal and so graphic in its characterization of time and place, that unless the composer could in imagination transplant himself to these and live through them, the play would get the better of him and his triumph, while outwardly his own, would in reality be but a second triumph for the creator of the drama. And this is what has happened in the case of Puccini's latest opera. The play's the thing. For not once does this opera, this play clothed in music, make a stronger appeal than it did as a play without any music at all; and that is the test. If a play that moves us profoundly is set to music it should move us more profoundly. Otherwise there is no reason why it should not have been left alone. Puccini's opera is not "The Girl of the Golden West." Most decidedly it is "La Fanciulla del West." For the composer has written a score absolutely Italian on a subject absolutely American. In other words the only thing American about the opera is the play on which it is based. A great opportunity for local, even national, atmosphere



THE LOTUS has been neglected; which is the more surprising, not only because the play constantly suggests it, but also because the composer never has neglected it before. On the contrary he has shown himself peculiarly apt at reproducing it—save in this one instance where it is of the greatest importance and where the drama actually thrusts it at him. Moreover, the playwright himself, in the incidental music which he introduced into the first act of the play, threw out the strongest kind of hint of what could be done with native musical material of the folksong order.

And this composer who so deliberately ignores the local color that in the Belasco play cries out for expression, is the same who has been so successful with it elsewhere. The music of "Bohème" is the music of the "quarter." The finale of the first act of "Tosca" reproduces the atmosphere of an Italian city which, although the time is the nineteenth century, still is steeped in medieval tyranny of church and state. But, above all, "Butterfly" is in its orchestral and harmonic coloring Japanese from beginning to end. Not only has Puccini in that score handled actual Japanese tunes (and always with the

requisite European touch) but he has imitated them with great skill, blending the whole with a melodiousness all his own, so that the Oriental coloring always is poetic and never in danger of becoming tiresome.



YET when it comes to the absolutely virgin field of an early California mining camp, with its driftwood of humanity, with its unrivalled because musically as yet untouched opportunity for local color, he has made no attempt to reproduce it. Indeed he seems deliberately to have turned his back on it, and his rejection of it arouses in one who can discern what he might have accomplished with it, a feeling of almost savage resentment. For here was a splendid chance for the leading Italian composer of the day to show our American composers, who constantly are imitating German models, what could be done with our few simple yet most beautiful melodies of the folksong order. With great adroitness Belasco introduced some of them into his play in the scene in the Polka saloon. They are just what California miners would have sung in moments of

THE LOTUS exhilaration and depression; and that Puccini, when he heard the play, should not have recognized their appropriateness is astounding.

But still more astounding is his lack of recognition of what he himself could have made of these tunes and others that readily might have been furnished him. Around them he could have thrown the mesh of his fine sense for harmony; could have varied them rhythmically in a dozen different ways; could have clothed them with infinite variety in the splendor of his orchestral garb; could have used them entire, where such use would have been effective, or employed portions of them as leading motives, so that the score, from beginning to end, would have been haunted with their beauty. Then, confronting us from before the curtain, he could have uttered these proud words:—"You have sent for me across the ocean and behold, I have come, bringing to you your own, which you knew not; your own, which you despised." What a splendid gift to us it would have been from this Italian—a gift of American music to the American people!

I shall not go as far as does one writer, who says that the "Camptown Races," "Old Dog

Tray" and the other songs which Belasco utilized so adroitly, "made more music in the first act of the original melodrama than Signor Puccini makes in the first act of his opera." But in point of fact Belasco, although in no sense a musician, knew by dramatic intuition the kind of music that would harmonize with the local color of the West of 1849 and give the scene in the Polka an added touch of reality. We Americans practically have no music of the "large" kind. But we do happen to have in the songs of Stephen Collins Foster—who died in a New York public hospital and barely was saved from a pauper's grave—some of the merriest and at the same time some of the most melancholy, refined and exquisite music of the folksong order that there is.



PUCCINI'S own librettists—Zangarini and Civinini—reminded him of his opportunity. Before the book of the opera is two pages old, there occurs the following suggestion of "Camp-town Races:"—

JOE, HANDSOME AND OTHERS (humming an American refrain): "Dooda, dooda, day." .

In the homesick scene some of the miners,

THE taking up the refrain of the camp minstrel's air,
LOTUS sing:—

And my dog Tray,
Will he know me still?

But in the Italian old dog Tray becomes, "Il mio cane mi ravvisera?" Of course the suggestion goes for nothing in the score. The composer no more has recognized "Old Dog Tray," than old dog Tray would recognize a master, who addressed him, "Il mio cane mi ravvisera?"

What opportunities lost! Think of that full-throated male chorus singing the "Camp-town Races" to the kind of accompaniment Puccini could have written for it! It would have carried the audience off its feet. True, "Old Dog Tray" or, better still, "Old Folks at Home" introduced into the first act, would have made the rest of the score sound like a desert barren of melody; but supposing the camp minstrel, who in the homesick scene sings a Zuni air (which American miners know nothing about) had sung the Foster song, and Puccini had built it up into an ensemble by harmonizing it, orchestrating it and otherwise handling it as he of all living musicians alone knows how; then

not letting go of it, but bringing it in again in a variety of ways—would not the appeal have been infinitely more natural and at the same time far deeper and more tender than it is now? The fact is that Puccini's "Forty-niners" are Italians masquerading as Americans. The miner in a red shirt might be a Garibaldian. In the ever-changing action in the Polka saloon, the composer's score expresses the quick sequence of happenings, but not the people back of them. The superficial gesture, the movement, the bustle—all these are in the score; but neither the circumstance nor the character of time, place and human nature that developed them. It is as if an Italian artist, having painted a scene in the Apennines and labelled it "California," asked us to accept it as an American landscape, because he has placed it on exhibition in the National Academy of Design.

